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ABSTRACT

Current views of the writing process are explored, and implications are drawn from them for the teaching of writing skills in the second language class. Certain psychological processes seem to be common to most writing tasks, namely: (1) the conception stage; (2) the incubation stage, in which two mental processes are at work getting the facts and arriving at a synthesis in terms of the writer's own thinking; and (3) the production, or actual writing stage. A final element that could be added is the revision process in which the writer takes on the role of the reader. Another writing-process model incorporates these stages, and points out the need to edit continuously as one writes in order to bridge the gap between thinking, which proceeds at a rapid rate, and transcribing, a much slower process. According to a composite model drawn from the research literature, teacher input into the writing process is most effective in the pre-writing and the rewriting stages. Suggestions for this input are: (1) facilitating student recall of information; (2) specifying the context as clearly as possible; (3) helping the student get the data right in terms of his or her own intentions; (4) correcting student errors, preferably in an interview; (5) teaching the student how to edit; and (6) using controlled exercises. (AMH)

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TEACHING WRITING SKILLS:
FOCUS ON THE PROCESS

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In recent years, there has been a renewal of interest in the teaching of writing. In part, this has been due to educators re-evaluating the place of writing in the school curriculum in this time of the expanding use of audio visual communication media and parental demand for a 'back to the basics' curriculum. However, in part this renewal of interest in writing has been due to the rapid development of psycholinguistics with its focus on the study of the language learning process.

Research in psycholinguistics and specifically research into the reading process has enlarged our understanding of the writing process and has resulted in a change in focus in writing research in the past decade. Traditionally, interest in writing and the teaching of composition was centered on the product of writing— the finished text. Researchers and educators analyzed and agreed upon 'good models' of written text. On the basis of these analyses they classified kinds of writing and prescribed maxims of good writing. Teaching practice focussed on introducing the student to good models and giving him stylistic rules with which to judge his own writing. A typical set of these prescriptive rules is as follows:

1. Choose a suitable design and hold to it.[1]
2. Make the paragraph the unit of composition.
3. Use the active voice.
4. Put statements in positive form.
5. Use definite, specific, concrete language.
6. Omit needless words.
7. Avoid a succession of loose sentences.
8. Express co-ordinate ideas in similar form.
9. Keep related words together.
10. In summaries, keep to one tense.
11. Place the emphatic words of a sentence at the end.

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[1](P. 145 Hirsch. The Philosophy of Composition; from W. Strunk and E.B. White, "The Elements of Style." New York, 1959).

More recently there has been a burgeoning interest in the process of writing or "processes by which writing is produced" (Britton p. 19). And although the psychological process or processes of writing are not yet well understood, nonetheless there are significant insights to be gained from this work. While product oriented studies have offered us insight into what to teach (what are some of the linguistic and logical features associated with good writing and what exercise types seem to develop in the student control over these features), a fuller understanding of the cognitive processes involved in writing "should" give us insight into when to teach "composition" skills (that is, at what points during the process can the teacher effectively intervene), and what kind of input is most effective in influencing the development of our students' writing abilities. This could help us to answer questions such as: - What is the value of the plan in the composition process?

or - When is it best to focus on sentence level items?. . . - before students write freely as in many controlled writing exercises . . . or after students have written through a correction-rewrite procedure?

In this paper I want to explore current views of the writing process and draw from them implications for the teaching of writing skills in the second language classroom.

The Writing Processes.

Current views of the writing process have developed from three main sources. First, from observing both directly and indirectly what people do as they write (Janet Emig, James Britton), secondly, from postulating a model of what must happen based on our knowledge of the limitations of the processing system of fluent writers (Frank Smith), and thirdly, from hypothesizing from what we know about the reading process to what the writer must cater to.

As Dr. Britton and his associates note in their report of on-going research "The Development of Writing Abilities (11-18)", it is clear that there are many different processes involved in producing different kinds of writing. However, Dr. Britton like other researchers of the writing process feel that there are certain psychological processes that are common to most writing tasks albeit in different portions.

Dr. Britton suggests three such stages: two pre-writing preparatory stages, the conception and incubation stages, and a production stage.

The first stage, 'conception', is a pre-writing stage. It "is completed when the writer knows that he is going to write and has formed some idea of what is expected of him." (Britton p. 25) In this stage, the writer selects from what he knows and thinks, and relates the writing task to this cognitive framework. The writer's ability to recall is critical at this stage. In the school setting the way in which the teacher sets up the task significantly effects the students' ability to process at this stage. Instructions in which the purpose of the task, how the topic is to be handled, and the role relationships involved (that is the social context of the task) are not clear make it difficult for the student to progress through this initial stage: "for the child who can barely manage the task, the conception stage can be harder than the writing itself." (Britton p. 25) On the other hand, the teacher can help the student through this stage by giving him detailed, step-by-step instructions.

In Dr. Britton's model the second stage, the incubation stage, is another prewriting and planning stage. He associates two mental processes with this incubation stage. First, the writer attempts to 'get it right' in

terms of the available facts. Writer strategies associated with this stage are the making of a summary and the writing down of factual data. Secondly, the writer needs to 'get it right' in terms of his own thinking. The writer's own communicative intention in the task is associated with this step and teacher input aims to influence the kind of process a student involves himself in; that is, the strategies a student uses to do the set task. Conventionally, teacher input at this incubation stage has usually focussed on the first step; that is, guiding the student to plan and organize appropriately in terms of the given data. For example, the composition plan with its focus on significant data (unity) and logical order (coherence) is a favorite teaching technique for influencing the student at this stage in the writing process. It is interesting to note that concerning THE PLAN, teachers seem to prefer it to students. Dr. Britton quotes from an eighteen-year-old girl in their study as follows:

> Before any big essay for example in English literature, I think to myself 'yes plan an essay like Miss _____ said'. But I begin to plan it and suddenly the urge to start the actual piece of written work is overpowering and 'bang' goes the plan. . . . I can rely on this happening every time without exception.
>
> (Britton p. 27)

However, Dr. Britton suggests that the second step in this incubation stage, "getting it right" in terms of the writer's own thinking (his own intentions), is equally essential for the student. This step necessitates that the student arrives at a synthesis of his own understanding; he has to be able to explain the matter to himself. This is where the communicative aspect of writing comes into play and without the writer being able to synthesize in terms of his own intentions, any organization of significant data

has little meaning. Dr. Britton notes that too often this aspect of planning is neglected by teachers and he suggests that one way the teacher might guide the student through this part of the process is to allow students the opportunity to talk through the topic. This, by allowing students to express tentative opinions and conclusions will help them make the essential synthesis.

The final stage in this model is the production or actual writing stage. It begins when the writer finds a way to start writing. Once started the writer usually writes for an extended, concentrated period of time in which interruptions are resented. However, even here writing is not continuous. Writers stop, scan back over what they have written, make alterations, stare into the sky, and continue writing. Teacher input at this stage which often consists of specific stylistic and grammatical demands seems to have an adverse affect on the process at this point. Dr. Britton writes, "Direct advice during writing is seldom helpful. Whatever influence can be exerted should come to the writer in other ways and at other times— at times when he is not actually engaged in writing." (Britton p. 37).

One final element in the writing process which is important, although it is not part of one of the three stages in Dr. Britton's model, is the revision process. In this final activity, before turning the text over to the reader, the writer takes on the role of reader of his own text in order to correct it, improve it, and confirm that it does represent the thoughts he intended. In this process the reader-writer dialogue nature of the communication is paramount as the writer has the chance to measure the fit between his intentions as a writer (thoughts) and the needs of the reader (textual representation). The role of this REVISION PROCESS becomes of

primary importance in the view of the writing process held by Dr. Frank Smith.

Dr. Smith presents a model of the writing process that is based not on observation but rather on our knowledge of man's memory processing system.

For Smith, writing is an interaction between the brain (thought) and text (written language). Two activities are associated with each of these poles in the interaction: composing and transcribing. The composing process is the thinking (putting into words) and the organizing of ideas. The transcribing process is the actual writing down of these ideas with all the conventions of grammar, spelling, and punctuation. According to Smith these two activities are in direct conflict because of the limitations of our processing system. Composing is fast; it occurs at the rate of thinking which seems to be at about 200-250 words per minute, the same rate as our comfortable rate of talking, listening, and reading. In contrast transcribing is slow; it is at a rate of about 15-20 words per minute. Smith hypothesises that this slowness of 'getting it down' interferes with the composing process.

This is where the editing process, a kind of revision activity, comes in to play so critical a role in Dr. Smith's view of the writing process. In editing, the writer stops transcribing, reads over what he has written, makes necessary corrections, relates what has been written to his thoughts and continues transcribing. For Smith this editing functions as the bridge between fast thinking and slow transcribing, and writing is a continuous interaction between the brain and the text which is possible because of this editing activity. Not only does the text influence what words we are going to write down next, but we do get ideas as a consequence of the text. Good writers apparently make a more extensive use of this editing activity than do

poor writers. As noted by Walter Petty in "Review of Research on the Writing Process,""good writers tend to be slower, to do more revising (particularly as they read what they have just written) and to stop more often to do this reading" (Odell p. 79).

According to Dr. Smith's model, any problems with transcribing is ruinous for the composing process. The fluent writer copes because he has developed a series of 'integrated movement sequences' for the writing down of words and groups of words which allows him to attend to composing. In writing, the fluent writer is paying attention to meaning, not to the conventions of transcription, such as spelling and basic grammar which he has internalized and which have become integrated to the point where and I quote: "the writer becomes preprogrammed to run off a complex act as an integrated sequence that cannot be modified or broken down into its parts without considerable disruption" (p. 123 Alphabetic Writing). A lack of 'integrated movement sequences' by slowing down the transcription process makes it impossible to keep hold of ideas long enough to get them down, in the same way that slow decoding in the reading process seriously affects memory processing and the ability to get meaning from a text. As Smith says "normal writing would be impossible if we had to stop and think about every letter individually, just as piano playing would be impossible if the pianist had to think about and play every arpeggio one note at a time" (Alphabet p. 125).

In terms of the learning and teaching of this complex writing skill, Smith holds that like all complex, integrated, language activities we learn to write by writing and by getting appropriate feedback on this writing. The transcribing conventions in particular are difficult to learn and are only learned by <u>constant correction</u>. Smith

also underlines the need for the student to have fluent models of what good writing is supposed to be.

The third source of our expanding understanding of the writing process is based on our knowledge of the reading process. In this perspective, reading and writing are considered as inverse faces of the same interpretative language process, an interaction between the writer and the reader through the text. Since this interaction can only take place to the extent that the writer and the reader share knowledge, the writer, to communicate must make use of this shared knowledge and cater to the needs of the reader. One way the writer does this is by following the conventions of language such as spelling rules, grammar rules, and discourse structure including accepted logic. By catering to these expectations of the reader, the writer can make reading easier. Reporting on-going research, Frank Smith noted that the clearer and more explicit the global intentions of the writer are expressed, the easier it is for the reader to read. Clear global intentions essentially refers to such good expository tactics as the use of topic sentences at the beginning of a paragraph and the use of explicit transitions between ideas. E.D. Hirsch, in "The Philosophy of Composition", extends this concept of the writer catering to the needs of the reader to a definition of good text: "a text is more efficient than another if it requires less effort by the reader in understanding the very same meaning" (Hirsch p. 8). He suggests this readability is best achieved when the clause structure of a sentence does not tax the memory processing system of the reader and allows for quick semantic closure within the clause structure (that is, words are in clear and close syntactic relationship). This ease of processing text (relative readability) is largely dependent on

the predictability of the text. Therefore, any strategy or technique in writing that increases the predictability and reduces uncertainty will make the text easier to read. This knowledge about the needs of the reader plays a significant role in the writing process, particularly in the revision stage, when the writer takes on the role of reader of his own text.

In summary then, we have a picture of the writing process that consists of three activities: prewriting, writing, and rewriting.

In the prewriting stage, the writer first relates the writing task to his cognitive framework and recalls the relevant stored information (conception). He then begins the process of selecting and organizing the data in terms of the information he has and in terms of his communicative intention (incubation).

In the actual writing stage, three activities occur and alternate: composing in which the writer thinks out what he will say (that is, what words, in what order), transcribing in which the writer puts his thoughts down on paper, and editing in which he goes back and forth from transcribing to rereading to composing to transcribing again.

Finally, in the rewriting stage, the writer takes on the role of reader and reviews his text in order to correct it, improve it, and confirm that it does represent his intended thoughts.

Now, according to this composite model of the writing process, at what point is teacher input effective and what kind of input is most effective in influencing the development of student writing skills?

According to both Smith and Britton teacher input into the writing process is most effective in the prewriting and rewriting stages. Input while the student

is actually writing seems to be disruptive. As Dr. Britton has observed: "Direct advice during writing is seldom helpful. Whatever influence can be exerted should come to the writer . . . at other times—at times when he is not actually engaged in writing." (Britton p. 37) Dr. Smith's model suggests that this is because any input upsets the delicate balance the writer has between composing and transcribing and puts too much of a strain on his memory processing system.

In the prewriting stage(s), the most meaningful teacher input seems to be of two types. First, input that facilitates student recall of information. For the ESL student this could expand to include the recall of language associated with the information. The other type of effective input is that which helps the student relate the writing task to his own cognitive framework by specifying the context of the assignment as concretely as possible, that is, specifying the purpose, the scope, and the writer-audience roles involved. One way the teacher can do this is by giving students step-by-step instructions concerning how to prepare to write. The teacher can also teach students strategies for organizing their data, such as:

(1) the Plan,

(2) or a system for writing down notes to help them retain facts in brief form

(3) or the different organizational structures of English text, (the topic sentence, the linear development of the paragraph, paragraph patterns alternating, opposing, etc.)

However, equally important in this prewriting stage is for the student to get the data right in terms of his own intentions. Britton suggests that this is closely linked with the concept of being able to explain the matter to oneself and suggests that the most effective teaching procedure here is to allow students the opportunity to talk

the topic out, to test tentative opinions and conclusions, and to thus arrive at a synthesis of their thinking. In the ESL classroom, this discussion would also help the student recall information and language.

In the rewriting stage effective teacher input can be of two kinds. First, the teacher can correct student errors. Dr. Frank Smith maintains that in learning to write the student learns by making the attempt and being corrected. The problem here of course is what to correct and how much to correct. At Concordia University, where I was involved in teaching composition for 4 years, we have found that a procedure combining the teacher-student interview technique with the technique of correcting only some of the errors at an interview session is effective. The teacher-student interview allows us to be sure that what we are correcting is a 'real' not a careless error. In our selection of errors, we correct the global (or text ones) first. These include such things as clear topic sentences, unity and coherence in the outline, and an explicit organization of functions within the paragraph. Only after a rewrite to improve these global problems, do we focus on sentence and word level errors. We have also found that by directing the student to correct global errors, a lot of the sentential and word errors disappear in the rewrite.

A second way that teachers can have meaningful input during this rewriting stage is by teaching the student strategies for assuming the role of reader of his own text; that is, teach the student how to edit his own work. Peer correction and checklist procedures are appropriate here especially if the students are taught to focus on the global intentions of the writer (are my topic sentences clear? transitions between ideas clear?) as well as such focal aspects as good sentence grammar, spelling and punctuation.

I would now like to return to the question of teacher intervention during the writing stage.

Both Dr. Britton and Dr. Smith advise against any teacher interference while the student is writing. This kind of input seems to put an added emphasis on the transcribing process which is ruinous to the composing process. A writer because of limitations on his memory processing system can't focus on meaning and letters at the same time. "Normal writing would be impossible if we had to stop and think about every letter (or word) individually." (Smith, Alphabet p. 125) Now, while I agree that we should be wary of intervening during the writing, there is a place for practice of the skills needed in transcribing and composing. As ESL teachers we can't assume that our students have control of the language. A lot of our time spent in developing their writing skills is spent on the teaching of form both at the sentence and text level. For this purpose controlled exercises have proven to be effective. Traditionally, controlled exercises in ESL methodology have tried to effect the actual writing stage by imposing certain controls either at the level of composing (semi-controlled exercises) or at the level of transcribing (controlled exercises). More recently it has been suggested (K. Johnson, H. Widdowson) that controlled exercises be developed that focus the student on the way different writer intentions and different contexts effect the written product. These controlled exercises aim to effect the process at the pre-writing stage.

Now according to this model, we should note two things in respect to our use of controlled exercises. First, they are most effective if done before a "writing" task begins or as a remedial measure after completion of a "writing" task. Secondly, controlled exercises

must not become an end in themselves, that is, the only kind of writing task we give our students. If we use them as such, we essentially short-circuit the writing process and we don't give our students the necessary opportunity to go through all stages of the very complex, integrated, psycholinguistic writing process. This may in part explain why, as so many ESL teachers have so often observed, that there is little transfer between controlled and free writing. In writing, the whole is more than the sum of the parts.

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